

First  
Unitarian  
Church of  
Des Moines



Bell Avenue and  
Casady Drive  
Des Moines 15,  
Iowa

An Introduction to the

# **First Unitarian Church of Des Moines**

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## **WHAT UNITARIANISM IS**

A Unitarian church or fellowship is a liberal and non-creedal religious society. Liberalism in religion is a philosophy, or belief, which stands for the right, the necessity, and the responsibility of an individual to find and possess his (or her) own faith. Liberal religion stands for unity in diversity.

The First Unitarian Church of Des Moines is such a society. It serves a large group of religious liberals in Des Moines and Central Iowa. Like other Unitarian churches, it was founded upon and operates under five cardinal principles:

1. Individual freedom or belief.
2. Discipleship to advancing truth.
3. Democratic process in human relations.
4. Universal brotherhood, undivided by nation, race or creed.
5. Allegiance to the cause of a united world community.

Democracy assumes the ability of the common people to govern themselves. Liberal religion insists upon Man's ability to govern himself well. Democracy trusts men to think for themselves. Liberal religion insists upon it, not only as a privilege, but also as a duty. Both children and adults in this society are free to ask questions without fear of censure.

## **Unitarianism Comes to Iowa**

Unitarianism came to Iowa when a congregation was assembled at Burlington on July 17, 1840. It had been granted a charter by the second legislative assembly of the territory of Iowa.

This pioneer group was unable to maintain its existence, and in a few years passed from the scene. But its influence was not lost. A strong Unitarian Fellowship was organized at Burlington in 1950.

## **Iowa Unitarian Association**

Liberal religious societies were formed at Davenport in 1868 and at Cedar Rapids in 1869.

Need was felt for a larger organization. Consequently a number of Iowa Unitarians and other religious liberals met at Gorham's hotel in Burlington on June 1, 1877, and formed the Iowa Unitarian Association.

A resolution of purpose, adopted at that meeting, stated:

"Whereas, entire freedom is necessary to the growth of religion in the souls of men and whereas, creed-bound organizations are an obstacle to human progress and happiness:

"Resolved, that we hereby unite ourselves into a permanent society for the purpose of building up free churches, based on practical righteousness, in the state of Iowa."

For a generation or so affiliation with the Iowa Unitarian association was confined to societies in the state. As years passed Unitarian and Universalist groups in neighboring states sought membership so that by 1962 there were churches and fellowships in Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and South Dakota in the association. Delegates at the annual conferences in Kansas City in 1960 and in Cedar Rapids in 1961 voted to recognize the broader scope of the association and to use the name "Prairie States Unitarian Universalist Association".

## **Beginnings in Des Moines**

Universalists organized early in the settlement of Polk county and Des Moines. J. M. Dixon's "Centennial History of Polk County", 1876, says:

"The Universalist society met in Moore's Hall (in Des Moines) in 1869. The church property (in 1876) is located on the corner of Sixth and Cherry. In Mitchellville the prevailing denomination is Universalist, the organization of which dates back to the infancy of the place. It controls the seminary which is located in Mitchellville." Although the society in Mitchellville is no longer active, it still possesses the meeting house which was erected in 1868.

## **Des Moines Unitarian Church**

At its first meeting in Burlington, the Iowa Unitarian Association named John R. Effinger field worker. On June 30 that year he met with 30 Unitarians, Universalists, Hicksite Quakers and other religious liberals in the Union Block, Fifth and Locust Streets in Des Moines, then a city of 22,000 population.

A little more than a month later, on August 4, 1877, nine persons meet again in Des Moines and associated themselves into the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines.

Mr. Effinger continued his work with the group for a short time. Then in 1879, S. S. Hunting came from Davenport to become the first regular minister. He remained until 1886.

The founders of the Des Moines society incorporated as a religious association September 22, 1880. The trustees during the first year of incorporation were Joel P. Davis, George White, E. A. Ayeret, William H. Fleming, Mrs. Deming, Mrs. Eliza H. Hunter and Mrs. Gue.





In 1881, a lot at Fifteenth and Linden streets was deeded to the society by Mrs. George C. Wright. (Her husband served as an Iowa Supreme court justice from 1855 to 1870. He was selected as a United States senator from Iowa in 1871.) A frame building, sketched at the left, was erected in 1882.

Miss Mary Safford, who had been minister in Sioux City, became minister in Des Moines in 1898.

Need for a better meeting house was felt early in her ministry. And much through her efforts, a site at Eleventh and High streets was acquired. A brick structure, sketched below, was erected and occupied in 1905.

The High street building was used for half a century. The property was purchased by the Iowa Farm Bureau



Federation in 1955. It was vacated by the Des Moines Unitarians in 1956.

Meanwhile plans went forward for a new and more functional Des Moines Unitarian center. Services were temporarily moved to the Y. W. C. A. building.

Mr. Amos Emery, a Des Moines architect and member of the church society, offered a four and a half acre wooded site at Bell Avenue and Casady Drive as a location for a new meeting house as a memorial to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. R. D. Emery who had been long-time members.

The offer was accepted. Mr. Emery was commissioned to design a building, contracts were let and construction started in the summer of 1956. The new meeting house, third home of Des Moines Unitarians, was occupied a year later in the summer of 1957. (Sketch on the cover.)

## **Aims of Des Moines Unitarians**

The Des Moines Unitarian church is a source of counsel and help, not only from its ministry, but also from the co-operative efforts of its members. It is a place where those in trouble, or baffled by their problems, are able to find guidance and understanding. It helps individuals live with their doubts.

It provides both a place and a service for marriage, and for the dedication of parents to their children, and finally, a memorial service for the dead.

The Des Moines Unitarian church is a place where the platform is free and unfettered, and it is a place where both children and adults can ask questions without fear of censure.

It extends its hand constantly in service through the world-wide reach of the Unitarian Service Committee and by unobtrusive projects of help closer to home.

Two women's groups, Unity Circle (organized in 1880) and the Evening Alliance, (1948), are outlets for service, education and inspiration, and as a fellowship of social and religious understanding. The Laymen's League chapter is for the cause of advancing liberal religion through projects of service and education.

There is a church school to inspire and impart in-

formation to children to the end of giving them a religion of their own. Liberal Religious Youth is for high school boys and girls. Forums, lectures and adult education in the tradition of liberty, and toward a free religious faith, round out the program.

The Drama Workshop provides a creative outlet for individuals in stimulating and provocative theatre. One can write for it, act in it, work for it, or enjoy it.

The choir is part of the opportunity for those who wish to participate in musical experience.

## **A Church Society Without A Creed**

The Des Moines Unitarian church has no creed. Assent to a Bond of Union, plus a willingness to share equitably in the work and support of the society, is all that is required for membership.

### **Bond of Union**

Here is the Bond of Union.

"We hereby associate ourselves together for the study and practice of morality and religions, as interpreted by the growing thought and the noblest lives of humanity, hoping thereby to prove helpful one to another and to promote truth, righteousness and love in the world."

### **The Larger Circle**

Although Unitarian and Universalist churches and fellowships are independent of any controls from above, each is part of the larger field. The Des Moines church society is a member of the Prairie States Unitarian Universalist Association, the Midwest Unitarian Universalist Conference, and the Unitarian Universalist Association of Canada and the United States, 25 Beacon St., Boston 8, Mass.

# THE UNITARIAN CHURCH

(By E. Burdette Backus, 1889-1955. Minister of the Des Moines Unitarian Community, 1935-1938)

Our church has no creed. Its members are convinced that freedom is the indispensable condition of wholesome spiritual life for men. We insist on being just as free to make discoveries in religion as the scientist is in biology or chemistry.

If the advent of a new truth requires the scrapping of old doctrines, we are ready to make the necessary adjustments. No creed bars the way. Ours is a church "in which all do not think alike, but in which all alike think".

Precious as is freedom, we do not regard it as an end in itself but rather as a condition in which alone we can fulfill our function, which is to enrich the individual life and to improve the social order.

Everything that contributes to the upbuilding of human life we regard as a legitimate object of our enthusiasm and practical endeavor. We are seeking to unite the age-old idealism of the human heart with the modern intellectual outlook.

Wherever a progressive and humanitarian work is being done in the world there is our religious fellowship.

We meet together to think clearly and feel deeply about the vital issues of life in order that we may act more nearly in accord with our ideals.

Ours is a church conceived in the spirit of freedom, guided by intelligence, enthusiastically devoted to the service of man. It is embarked upon high adventure and welcomes daring souls to its company.



## Religion Without Fear

(From a sermon delivered Nov. 19, 1961, by John B. Isom,  
minister of the Des Moines Unitarian Church.)

History teaches us that religions arose around persons who dared to pose as having authoritative information about things beyond the realm of human knowledge. The religious systems that thus arose, especially those of our culture, populated the unknown parts of the universe with superhuman beings, upon whose good graces man's well being here and for all eternity depended.

Thus through man's aspirations and curiosity to know and to cope with the unknown, religions arose that created devils and gods, heavens and hells, and in so doing added additional objects of fear to man's already too fearful existence. We call such fears religious fears . . . .

One of the major objectives of the Unitarian church is to provide a religious community, or fellowship, in which what is associated with religion will make it possible for the religious sentiment to develop and grow in children without tainting their minds with such hideous fears . . . .

Most of the churches in our vicinity still give strong lip service to the basic assumptions without which there could be no such fears. I mean the assumptions that there is a hell; that there is a heaven; that man has a feeling and conscious part that will live in one of the two places forever; that the church, either through its priests or the Bible, has infallible instructions from a supernatural being as to how man may escape hell or win heaven.

As long as such assumptions make up the core of the major streams of religious thought, the children of men will be exposed in varying degrees to religious fears that have, far too long already, kept man religiously immature . . . .

Unitarians would unite those who are convinced

that, if the religious sentiment is ever to be free of the hideous fears that have haunted man for ages, religion itself must be completely divorced from all pretensions that man has knowledge of a supernatural order in the universe.

All the religious dogmas and stories that assume such knowledge must be accepted and appreciated as being no less the fictional creation of the human imagination than the non-religious myths and fairy tales of our human tradition.

## **God, Jesus and the Bible**

(From a pamphlet by A. Powell Davies [1902-1957], minister of All Souls' Unitarian Church, Washington, D. C. [1944-1957]).

Unitarians are free to believe about God whatever persuades them.

Unitarians believe that Jesus was a great prophet but not a person of the Trinity. They think he means far more as a man than as a supernatural figure...The Gospel record, as interpreted by sound scholarship, does not support the view that Jesus thought himself as a savior, offering a blood atonement, or that he regarded himself as a person in the Trinity, although he may have thought of himself in the last months of his life as a Jewish messiah.

Unitarians do not regard the Bible as a verbally inspired book. They regard it as a collection of many books, of varying value, written over a long period of time. They do not think the Bible is a supernatural revelation but they do find in it many insights and messages of enduring value.

Most Unitarians think that the scriptures of the other great religions are of similar value, and that inspired words are still being written. They would think,

for instance, that the Gettysburg address deserves to take its place with what is in the Bible.

Unitarians do not believe in the Virgin Birth. Virgin Birth has been asserted of many others besides Jesus . . . Unitarians believe that natural birth is sufficiently wonderful and that there is nothing impure about it.

(A pamphlet, issued by the American Unitarian Association in 1940 stated that "Unitarians believe Jesus to have been a normal man, naturally born of Joseph and Mary.")

Unitarians are free to believe whatever persuades them about an after life. They do, however, reject the belief in eternal punishment as being both incredible and immoral . . . Most Unitarians would say that the question of survival after death cannot be answered from knowledge or experience.

## **Respect for Building Site**

In 1961, The Des Moines Tribune asked Professor Leonard Wolf, head of the department of architecture at Iowa State University in Ames, to select what he considered the 10 best buildings in Des Moines.

No. 8 in his list was the First Unitarian building. Of it, Dr. Wolf said:

"This simple and dignified building, with its graceful lines, makes excellent use of the terrain around it. It says: 'Unlike he usually does, man has been here and has respected the site.'"

## Disbelief in Doctrine of the Trinity

(From Volume I of Joseph Priestley's *Early Opinions*. Dr. Priestley, clergyman and scientist, was the discoverer of oxygen. He was run out of England because of his unorthodox religious opinions. He came to the United States where he founded the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia in 1796. Dr. Priestley called his four-volume work *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ Compiled From Original Writers Proving That the Christian Church Was at First Unitarian*. The work was published in 1786.)

Had there been any distinction of persons in the divine nature, such as the doctrine of the trinity supposes, it is at least so like an infringement of the fundamental doctrine of the Jewish religion, that it certainly required to be explained, and the obvious inference from it to be guarded against.

Had the eternal father had a son, and also a spirit, each of them equal in power and glory to himself, though there should have been a sense in which each of them was truly God, and yet there was, properly speaking, only one God; at least the more obvious inference would have been, that if each of the three persons was properly God, they would altogether make three gods.

Since, therefore, nothing of this kind is said in the Old Testament, as the objection is never made, nor answered, it is evident that the idea had not then occurred. No expression, or appearance, had at that time even suggested the difficulty. (pp 6, 7)

Why was not the doctrine of the trinity taught as explicitly, and in as definite a manner in the New Testament at least, as the doctrine of divine unity is taught in both the Old and New Testaments, if it be a truth?

And why is the doctrine of unity always delivered



in so unguarded a manner, and without any exception made in favor of a trinity, to prevent any mistake with respect to it, as is always now done in our orthodox catechisms, creeds, and discourses on the subject? For it cannot be denied but that the doctrine of the trinity looks so much like an infringement of that of the unity (on which the greatest possible stress is always laid in the scriptures) that it required to be at least hinted at, if not well defined and explained, when the divine unity was spoken of.

Divines are content, however, to build so strange and inexplicable a doctrine as that of the trinity upon mere inferences from casual expressions, and cannot pretend to one clear, express, and unequivocal lesson on the subject.

There are many, very many passages of scripture, which inculcate the doctrine of divine unity in the clearest and strongest manner. Let one such passage be produced in favor of the trinity. And why should we believe things so mysterious without the clearest and most express evidence? (pp 12, 13)

## Unitarian Historic Dates

Roots of Unitarian thinking go back to the dawn of history. In all ages the free spirit of man has rebelled against ancient dogma. The name "Unitarian", however, did not gain wide usage until the Protestant Reformation. It was used perhaps for the first time about 1568 in Transylvania.

1531. Servetus, Spanish physician and theologian, published "**On the Errors of the Trinity**". The book was suppressed.

1533. Servetus, after hiding for 20 years, was found, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake in Geneva.

1554. Sebastian Castellio, published "**Concerning Heretics**"

at Basle, questioning execution of Servetus.

1568. Francis David, court preacher in Transylvania, supported Unitarian teaching in historic debate before King John Sigismund, himself a Unitarian, who issued an edict of toleration.

1579. Francis David, tried for heresy after death of Sigismund, died in prison.

1579. Faustus Socinus, Italian, became leader of the Unitarian movement in Poland.

1647. John Biddle, in England, published three tracts attacking the doctrine of the trinity.

1658. After a period of violent persecution in Poland, Unitarian churches were destroyed and Unitarians banished on insistence of Roman Catholic authorities who had come into control of the government.

1770. Beginnings of the Universalist movement with the arrival in New Jersey of the Rev. John Murray of London, England.

1774. Theophilus Lindsey opened Essex street chapel, Unitarian, in London. Benjamin Franklin attended services there.

1785. King's Chapel in Boston revised the English Book of Common Prayer to accord with Unitarian ideas and altered all references to Jesus as a deity.

1786. Joseph Priestley, scientist and clergyman, published "An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, Compiled from Original Writers, Proving That the Christian Church Was at First Unitarian."

1796. Priestley, driven out of England for his unorthodox opinions, came to the United States and founded churches at Northumberland and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. The Philadelphia church was the first religious society in the United States to use the name "Unitarian".

1805. Hosea Ballou, Universalist, wrote first book published in America openly rejecting the doctrine of the trinity.

1825. American Unitarian Association founded on May 25.  
 British Unitarian association founded on the same day.  
 1842. First Canadian Unitarian church founded in Montreal.  
 1852. Western Unitarian Conference organized.  
 1852. Tufts College established at Medford, Mass., by the  
 Universalists.  
 1868. Unitarian Church founded at Davenport.  
 1877. Iowa Unitarian Association organized at Burlington on  
 June 1.  
 1877. Des Moines Unitarian Church founded Aug. 4.  
 1940. Unitarian Service Committee established to carry out  
 world-wide humanitarian objectives.  
 1961. American Unitarian Association and the Universalist  
 Church of America united into the Unitarian Universalist  
 Association.  
 1961. Iowa Unitarian Association becomes the Prairie States  
 Unitarian Universalist Association.  
 1962. Western Unitarian Conference and the Midwest Uni-  
 versalist Conference united into the Midwestern Unitarian  
 Universalist Conference.

## HOW DES MOINES UNITARIAN CHURCH IS MAINTAINED

The First Unitarian Church of Des Moines is supported financially by voluntary contributions from members and friends in the city and in central Iowa. If you wish to help in the furtherance of this liberal religious movement, send your contribution with this coupon.

Treasurer, First Unitarian Church,  
 Bell Ave. and Casady Drive, Des Moines 15, Iowa

I wish to help maintain liberal religion in the Des Moines area. Here is my contribution for that purpose.

Name .....

Address .....

Post Office .....

## How You May Learn More About Unitarianism

If you would like to receive notices of our church activities, or if you desire to become better acquainted with Unitarianism, please check your preferences in the space below and sign your name and address. You may give the request to an usher at church services, or you may mail it to the Extension Committee, First Unitarian Church, Bell avenue and Casady drive, Des Moines 15, Iowa.

- ( ) Please put my name on your mailing list.
- ( ) I desire a personal call by the minister or by a member of the extension committee.
- ( ) I desire a conference with the minister in his study at the church building.

Name .....

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Postoffice .....

Telephone .....

### FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

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Trustees of the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines hope this little pamphlet answers some of your questions about Unitarianism. It is published as a memorial to founders of the society and to all other members who lived with open minds and died without fear.